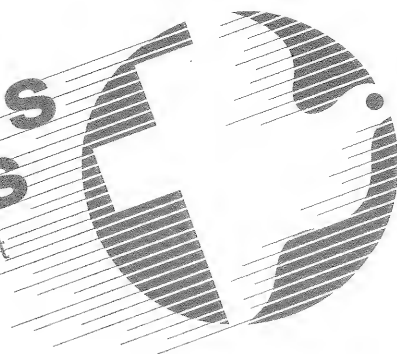


- A publication of MCC
Committees on Women's Concerns
- July–August 1999
- Report No. 145

Women's Concerns

Report



Women's journey through grief

I am increasingly aware in the audiences for whom I preach, teach and lead discussions that grief, often unresolved, is an ever-present reality. We are aided from the time we are children to acquire material things, relationships, certificates and degrees, paychecks, etc., and to preserve what we have acquired. But we receive much less assistance and guidance on how to cope with the loss of valued things and people to whom we held deep emotional attachments. Sometimes people around us will give us two weeks or two months to "get over" whatever is bothering us, but then it is back to the races and life goes on. When we are audacious enough to express grief after the "allowable" period of time, we cause discomfort in the hearers and are blessed with a generous helping of platitudes that leave us wondering, "What's wrong with me?" Only the most courageous individuals will break society's expectations and insist upon doing grief's hard work.

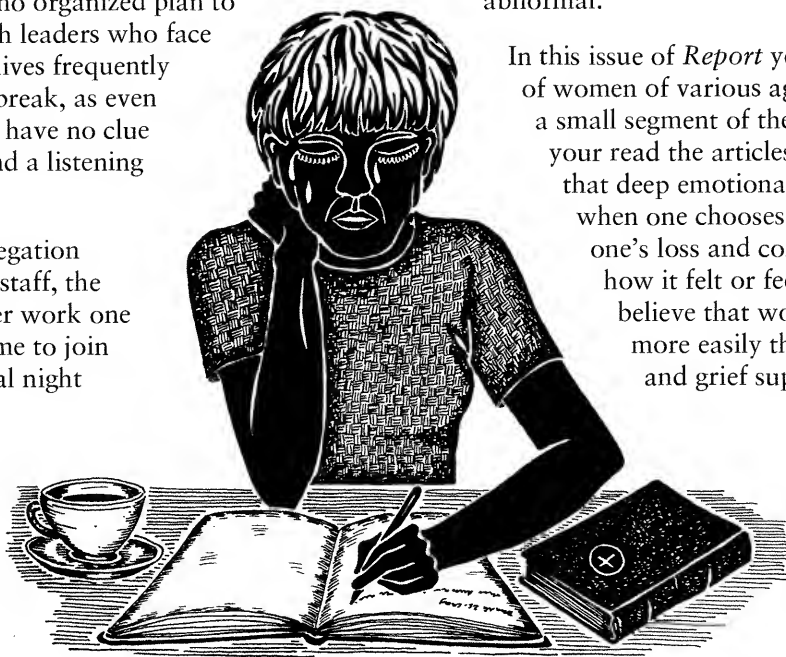
While our churches and our clergy should have the edge on providing safe places for grieving parishioners, most churches provide no organized plan to minister to the grieving. Church leaders who face great loss and tragedy in their lives frequently walk on a lonely path of heartbreak, as even their own peers and colleagues have no clue about how to offer presence and a listening ear to a grieving friend.

Several years ago, in the congregation where I served on the pastoral staff, the church secretary finished up her work one Friday afternoon and went home to join her husband on their traditional night

out. Upon returning home that night she was not feeling well, so she lay down for a time before retiring for the night. Her chest discomfort did not abate, so they drove to a nearby hospital emergency room. She was admitted, having experienced a heart attack. Surgery the next day was difficult, and on Sunday afternoon she died, leaving a large biological family and a congregational family in shock beyond belief.

While working with the staff that week to plan the worship service for the following Sunday, I advocated for our grieving congregation. At my suggestion, the senior pastor and minister of music agreed that we were not ready to get back to business as usual. Yes, we had had a very large viewing and funeral service for Shirley, and many people from the church had attended. But, we needed to stop and give permission for expressions of gratitude for this one we appreciated and to tell our people that it is right and good to mourn her passing. And we needed to tell them that anything they were feeling right now in this time of shock was not abnormal.

In this issue of *Report* you will meet a variety of women of various ages who have shared a small segment of their grief journey. As you read the articles you will be aware that deep emotional wells are tapped when one chooses to bring to memory one's loss and commences to write how it felt or feels. Some people believe that women share their grief more easily than men. The loss and grief support groups which



I facilitate have mostly women participants, but I also could name men who have been models in dealing with grief. You will note in the resource list that the books by Clayton and Dotterweich are specifically about women's grief. Having been raised in a family where my father modeled healthy grieving and noting that my adult son responds in similar ways to life's losses, any analysis on my part about the qualitative or quantitative differences in the grieving processes between women and men would not be objective.

When grief is disenfranchised

The sharing of a segment of my grief journey will focus on what therapists and instructors call "disenfranchised grief." In this category are losses in life that may not be as visible as others and losses that other people do not think affect us. People understood when I grieved the violent four-month illness that snatched my mother away from our family at age 59. But the other grief that was brewing in my life during those years, though unseen, was equally overwhelming. I was experiencing the fallout of an intrapsychic loss which at that time I was unable to name. I just knew that my insides were in turmoil most of the time and that I lived with a sense that years were adding up but nothing else was. (Mitchell and Anderson in *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs* note six major categories of loss we face in life to which we respond with grief: material, relationship, intrapsychic, functional, role and systemic). Intrapsychic losses are inside-the-soul losses. They include "the loss of an emotionally important image of oneself, losing the possibilities of what might have been, abandonment of plans for a particular future, the dying of a dream" (Mitchell and Anderson, p. 40).

From our early years of marriage, I became active in lay leadership positions in our home congregation. I thrived on church volunteering. All other duties and activities (housekeeping, homemaking, my nursing job and socializing) paled by comparison. An unusually strong desire for a college education refused to leave my day-dreams. I gathered college catalogs and tried to narrow down what I should major in. For a number of years, I hoped to begin at least one class, but first one situation and then another

stood in the way. For several consecutive years when my April birthday came again and there were no hopes of fulfilling my dream, I would succumb to yet another period of depression. I grieved in my journal especially as I identified with several Old Testament prophets.

During my growing-up years, had I been a young man instead of a young woman, my friends, relatives and ministers would have encouraged me to go to college and study for pastoral ministry. Even during my 10 years of waiting until I could start my first degree, I hardly thought of studying for pastoral ministry because there were no clergy women models. I could not hope for something that did not exist, or something that the Scriptures prohibited, or so I thought. I had a burning in my heart for public speaking but very few outlets.

Many years later I understood more fully what kind of death and grief I was experiencing during those years. Dr. Peter Schreck (professor at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary) writes and teaches on the importance of the merging of what we are created to do and be in life with our integrity. When we are prohibited from responding to our giftedness or divine enablement, we foreclose on our wholeness. (See Schreck's chapter in *Family Therapy: Christian Perspectives*, Baker Book House, 1991.) Little by little I was dying on the inside, and the grief was unending. I was created to be a pastor but my religious subculture had no place for such an anomaly. Thank God that before I became a walking body with a dead Spirit, my industry and my integrity found one another during my academic preparation and in my call to several pastoral positions. When I claimed the freedom to name my call to pastoral ministry and started on the long road of preparation in midlife, my depression and grief vanished.

When death comes to a close friend

It is a disservice to belittle any source of grief that someone experiences. No grief is insignificant. If our natural response to any loss is grief, it is significant. But one other grief which frequently falls into the disenfranchised category is grief over the loss of a friend. In recent years I have lost three close friends and mentors to death. I openly grieve their absence especially during times of sharing in the support groups which I facilitate. Frequently, at the time of death we tend to forget that the one who died may have been emotionally closer to a



friend than to most family members. When no one knows of the emotional ties, the grieving friend experiences a lonely, unaddressed soul-grief.

When Dale, who had been my pastor in those early seed-planting days, became incapacitated by a brain tumor and was no longer able to minister in his church, I began a long and terrible grief. He had believed in me, and we ministered together as a team—even though I was a lay leader. Now in our mid-40s, I had hoped that when my formal education was through, we might once again be able to pastor a church together. In the intervening years he and his wife showed interest in my call to ministry and my educational pursuits. I sent him papers I had written, and we caught up on our lives at various church gatherings.

I felt angry with God. After all, the church needed Dale and so did the hundreds of people he had pastored, not to mention his wife and family. I was in the last year of my master of divinity degree work. More than once, a wave of sadness would make it necessary to leave the classroom or the library so I could vent my feelings in relentless sobs. When I sat with him one day not long before his death, we reminisced of our days of ministry together. At the close of our visit, he offered a pastoral prayer just like he did when he was my pastor. I cried unashamedly and bid him farewell for the final time. God gave me the strength and privilege to share a tribute at both funeral services following his death.

Nearly a week later, my husband and I were traveling home from visiting our daughter, and I noticed that I had quite a bit of discomfort on my left side during the several-hour trip. The following day in my seminary class, the pain became so severe I had to leave class early and drive home. A check of the midsection of my body revealed a

line of red sores. A call to the doctor confirmed what I suspected—I had shingles, a viral condition that often manifests itself in this manner following severe stress and disruption in one's emotional moorings. The pain along that nerve line lasted a long time. I did my grief work over the years by writing, talking and crying it out in support groups. A new level of healing came when his wife and I traveled together by car to a Chicago conference. She told me every detail of his terrible illness. I listened and cried and healed.

My prayer for the reader of this issue of *Report* is to find the courage to grieve losses and move to a new level of healing. Kass Dotterweich says it well in her CARE NOTE titled, "Grieving as a Woman." She writes,

Once we have been gripped with the pain of grief, life changes and is never the same. We change and are never the same. What we could not live without, we do. A life that could not go on, does. When we are able to grieve well as women, we will look at the tapestry of our lives and see the precious threads of loss and grief, and we will recognize the fabric as our own. We will see how loss gave way to gain, death gave way to life, and pain gave way to peace.

—Janet M. Peifer, compiler

Janet, an ordained Brethren in Christ minister, is director of pastoral care at Messiah Village, a continuing care retirement community. From age 39–53 she completed three academic degrees at Messiah College, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Lancaster Theological Seminary. She is married, is the mother of two children and enjoys two grandchildren. She and her husband live in Boiling Springs, Pa.

"I know that I often jumped to the next hurdle without dealing with the first one. I am beginning to understand that when a loss of any type is not dealt with properly, it finds its way to the surface."

by Michelle Stoner

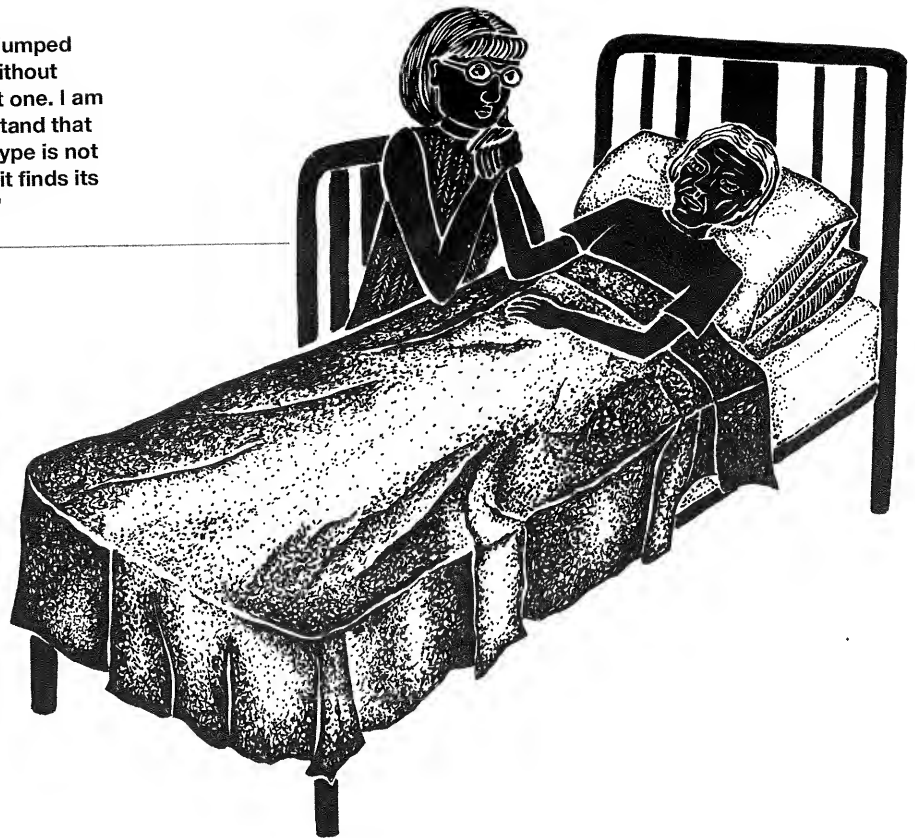
When life begins as loss

Loss and grief were my companions from day one. My twin brother and I were born seven weeks premature with numerous medical problems. My brother died two days after birth as a result of under-developed lungs. My maladies included a detached retina which left me with irreparable total vision loss in one eye, and congenital hip dysplasia which would adversely affect my walking for life.

My focus as a young child was not like that of others. Instead of being carefree, I constantly worried about what I had to do next. By age 5, I still could not walk unaided by a walker or cane unless the walk was no further than around the kitchen table. That same year my father was killed in a motorcycle accident. My parents had divorced earlier so my only conscious memory of my father was seeing his body at his funeral. I cannot remember being adversely affected by his death as a 5-year-old, but unaddressed feelings would catch up with me in years to come.

Fortunately, I attended an elementary school where I have no memories of difficulties with being accepted by others—though my physical differences were quite noticeable. I took on circumstances as a challenge and did my best to be just like any other child my age.

However, other aspects of my childhood and teenage years were difficult. I endured numerous surgeries and painful physical therapy to correct my walking. The degree of surgical success varied, but even today I walk with a great deal of pain and a very noticeable limp. Family life at home with my mother, stepfather and two stepbrothers became very strained. My parents chose not to attend the church I attended. My mother's stress level frequently ended up in expressions of anger through



yelling at even the smallest things. My stepfather had an apparent need for tight control over everything. A two-hour trip to the hospital for one of my appointments would turn into a fighting match between my parents before we ever got to the end of our street. As my mother comforted my stepfather, I dealt not only with my fear of going to the hospital but with guilt for causing a parental fight.

I became angry with God for allowing the constantly unbearable circumstances in my life. If God loved me, I wondered, why would God not put an end to my pain and misery? I was angry with all the doctors who pricked and poked me and stole my privacy. Hospitals became like prisons where the doctors talked over me instead of to me. I felt anger at the people who stared at me and my physical disability and assumed that I had a mental disability as well, before I had a chance to let them know who I really was.

When I was 14, I was ecstatic at having secured my first job. I talked by telephone to the owner of a nearby store about a cash register job. He told me the job was mine. I walked into the store feeling like the luckiest person in the world. I met his stare of surprise and his piercing question, "Do you think you can handle this job?" The owner pulled my mother into the hallway and told her he couldn't hire me. I was crushed. I hadn't even been given

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a chance to prove that I had the ability. Couldn’t someone accept me for who I was? “Why, God,” I cried out, “can’t I have a fair chance like everyone else?”

In my junior year of high school I was hospitalized for my tenth surgery—this time for a complete hip replacement. My heart weighed a thousand pounds. I began to question why God created me in the first place. I just wanted to die. Looking back, I now realize that God provided a great deal of support for me through my church family. And even though I made a conscious choice to move away from God for a time, God did not move away from me.

Life became unbearable at home and I moved in with one of the church families. At this stage in my journey I desperately longed for someone (preferably a boyfriend) to accept me. I began lowering my standards and morals so I could be totally accepted by at least one person. I dated several guys and became friends with others who did not share my personal value system. Despite everything, I managed to make it to my high school graduation and two weeks later moved into my own apartment.

As I struggled to become an independent young adult, the one relative who had offered the most constant love and attention to me throughout my growing up years, lay dying. My paternal grandmother supported and stuck by me in the good and the bad. Now she was suffering terribly and came to the brink of death numerous times that year. When she died I felt the bottom of my life dropping out. I could not imagine how I could handle life without her. Did God hate me?

Through the support of a close friend I came to realize that it is OK to cry and to ask questions. I learned that there is nothing wrong with sharing my feelings and that I don’t always have to be the strong one. I attended counseling sessions for several years and participated in a loss and grief support group. I read everything I could get my hands on that shed light on my dark pathway.

In the midst of life’s heaviest storms I could not see straight, but God was faithful and carried me. When there seemed to be no way through, God made a way. In looking back, I have learned that not only does God want us to “get through” our circumstances, but we must “work through” them. I know that I often jumped to the next hurdle without dealing with the first one. I am beginning to understand that when a loss of any type is not dealt with properly, it finds its way to the surface and can cause actions which are less than pleasing to God.

I find solace in Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Twelve surgeries and numerous other losses have afforded me adequate mourning material. Along with my mourning has come a level of acceptance. I spent many years worrying about others accepting me, but I never accepted myself. God has created me and therefore, I am accepted by the one who matters most. Even though I will never crawl up onto my earthly father’s lap and rest in his arms, I now have experienced the love and acceptance of God, my heavenly parent.

I thank God for answering many of my prayers and setting me free from the devastating pain and bondage that my losses have afforded. I am now married to my best friend and he does accept me for who I am. God has blessed us with our first home and we wait on further direction for our life together.

Michelle is trained as a medical assistant and currently works as a receptionist for a health insurance company. She and her husband, Matt, attend Faith Calvary Church in Lancaster, Pa.

"As I read the morning newspaper, I could hear myself saying, 'I can't wait to tell Paul about this!'"

by Esther Dourte Snyder

When death allows no prelude

I was speaking to my husband one minute and a minute later he was gone. No warning or chance to prepare—just gone. Paul's death was inconceivable to me. He never revealed any of the typical symptoms of heart failure such as tightness in his chest or shortness of breath. I was left with the task of making the most of widowhood. I would be alone—unaccompanied by the one with whom I had ministered and served for 35 years. The trauma and disbelief created a helpful shock for the first couple days. But when the memorial service was history and the family returned to their homes and work, the hard, cold facts of separation and loss came home to reside. Death's cruelty became real.

The car coming up the driveway belonged to a friend or stranger—not Paul. The steps on the staircase were not his. There was an unbearable empty space in our queen-sized bed. I would stand at the kitchen door and think I saw him coming across the lawn with his prized first sweet potatoes of the season. As I read the morning newspaper, I could hear myself saying, "I can't wait to tell Paul about this!" Other times I angrily spouted, "Death, you are so cruel!"

I have lived alone for 15 years since Paul's death. In my journey of grief, I have found that certain attitudes and resolves have aided my growth and healing. When the gaping hole caused by death will not go away, bereaved Christians can ask God to help them not to succumb to the hopeless abandonment of life. They can start a journey of disciplined motivation and develop a measure of contentment that puts them on an upward climb. Anne Linbergh wrote, "It isn't for the moment that you are struck that you need courage, but for the long uphill climb." The bereaved one starts plodding, grudgingly at first, but strangely the process becomes real and reasonable as one realizes God's provisions along the way. Here are steps I found helpful.

Accept where you are on the journey

Accept where you are on your journey and believe and know that God accepts that, too. God doesn't expect you to get on the top of your circumstances quickly nor that you stay on top of them even when you do experience a measure of healing. We move through life not thinking that death will happen to our loved ones—or at least, not yet. So we do little to prepare ourselves for its eventuality. The process of grief is a pendulum that swings from utter devastation to a triumphant day without tears. However that triumph is frequently short-lived because the slightest circumstance can trigger a gush of tears, denial, anger or bitterness.

Grieving spouses feel incomplete. Our culture is a "couples" world. Tables in public places are set for twos, fours or eights. Break-out groups form in even numbers. People are insensitive and fail to ask "uncoupled" persons to join them. When you act brave, others presume you've "gotten over it."

I came to dislike when others told me, "You are so strong." The independence that is so cherished in our culture makes asking for help distasteful. Despite that, I found that asking for help allowed for some amazing goodness on the part of God's people.

God accepts you and where you are on your journey of grief. Accept yourself and prepare to take additional steps toward healing.

Activate your own potential

Activate your own potential and set goals for your life alone. This may not be what you want to do, but it is what is needed. Evaluate your resources such as skills, education, personality, business ability and decision-making techniques, and plan to do something. The manner in which one's potential can be activated depends on one's particular place in life—i.e., your age, geographic location, health, support system, etc. I found that my final goal was to become busy with a cause bigger than myself.



"I came to dislike when others told me, 'You are so strong.' The independence that is so cherished in our culture makes asking for help distasteful."

Other scriptures which have helped me keep a God-consciousness in my life are these:

1 Timothy 5:3—"Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need." The Christian community can be one of love and care. Need does not necessarily mean financial; there are many ways to be needy.

Luke 18:4,5—"In the parable of the judge and the widow the judge stated, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice.'"

Job 29:13—Job recounts the good things he had done, "I made the widow's heart sing." It is possible for the widow to be happy again.

Psalms 146:9—"The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow."

Psalms 147:3—"He healeth the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds."

Isaiah 54:5—"For your Maker is your husband. The Lord Almighty is his name."

The severity and intensity of sorrow lessens over time, but it never goes away. The periods of sorrow can be triggered by the strangest of circumstances. Despite that aching hole which can never be filled, God's faithfulness is evidenced again and again in tender, caring ways. The caring can come directly from God or through family and friends, but in some sense the one who grieves walks alone.

Esther is retired from a teaching and ministry career and lives at Freedom Village in West Brandywine, Pa. She is a licensed minister in the Brethren in Christ Church and is mother of three adult children. She has served as a consultant for the Andrew Center in Elgin, Ill., as associate for field services for the BIC churches of the Atlantic Conference, and as minister of Christian education at the Manor BIC Church, Mountville, Pa. Her teaching career spanned all ages from 3-year-olds to graduate students.

One is wise to choose honest-to-goodness, worthwhile activities and not just mark time which is deadly to one's psychological health. Becoming active in worthwhile activities soon brings many additional opportunities.

Volunteer opportunities are legion in our communities and churches. Therapeutic journal writing, reading, inviting a friend in, or going to visit another lonely person can bring meaning to the one who is seeking to fill empty hours and days. Stretch yourself with an activity that demands courage. Giving more attention to your own grandchildren or those of another person is a most worthwhile activity. Or just do something that is purely for your pleasure such as developing a new skill such as arts, crafts or piano lessons.

Awaken a renewed faith in God

The Bible is incredibly relevant for the one on a journey of grief. In 2 Corinthians 1 we are reminded that hurt and sorrow come our way:

to school us in the subject of comfort (v.4)

to teach us to rely on God (v.9)

to give value to shared prayers (v.10,11a)

"Grief took on new hues. I felt a sense of relief that the suffering was finished for LeRoy, but I was hardly prepared for my walk through grief without him. At the burial service as the casket was lowered into the grave, I found myself wanting to join him in the grave."


by Cora E. Walters

When grief lingers not for death

During a routine physical check-up, while we were busily serving in pastoral ministry in our sixth congregation, my husband LeRoy was told he had a small cancerous tumor. That day marked the beginning of 10 years of radiation and other treatments to slow down or stop this insidious disease. It also marked the onset of grief's uncharted territory for me and the family. I was a nurse by profession, so we sought conventional medical interventions as well as suggested natural remedies—all to no avail. In LeRoy's final pastoral assignment as chaplain at Messiah Village, his pain became intolerable. There was no recourse except surgery. A surgical specialist decided on extensive lower back work which left him unable to walk due to nerve involvement.

We had just bid farewell to our seventh congregation and 46 years of ministry together. On the day after Christmas 1984, we bid farewell to LeRoy's independence and mobility. He had always said he wanted to marry a nurse and now we both knew why. I devoted my finest nursing skills to the one I loved the most.

We took up residence in one more home. The pain of leaving our home to go into a retirement community was greatly lessened because we chose our lot and planned our retirement cottage together in detail. Even though LeRoy was too ill to assist manually with the move, we were showered with the love of 30 people who transported our earthly goods and set them in their places at the new cottage. When all was in order, our children moved LeRoy last, complete with his electric bed, motorized mattress, trapeze, wheelchair and lift. We placed his bed beside the patio door overlooking the grassy slope and the woods below. Out of the front door he could see the chapel where only months before he had accepted the keys to the newly completed place of worship. From his bed he could watch me working in the kitchen. Facing one another, we would eat the hearty meals I had prepared.

We worked together through our mutual grief. He told me he was sorry that I had to work so hard to care for him. I let him know that he was the best patient I had ever cared for. In our devotional times together we discussed the Scriptures we read. One evening I read, "Therefore seeing that we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight," (Hebrews 12:1). I said, "Does that mean the witnesses above or the witnesses down here?"

"That means the witnesses above," LeRoy promptly replied. I felt at peace that when LeRoy died, he would be among those witnesses. During one of our prayers together, LeRoy prayed warmly for his caring oncologist at Hershey Medical Center. He closed with, "Lord, our times are in your hands." I knew that he was resigned to God's will for himself. While I cared for LeRoy I prayed that I would not need to see the deterioration which often accompanies malignancy. Our love for each other flourished in a new and beautiful way.

On one of our routine trips to Hershey Medical Center for treatment, the attendant in the back of the ambulance with LeRoy suffered from a heavy cold. I knew it would be a miracle if my husband who now had little resistance to germs would avoid adverse affects from this exposure. The miracle did not happen. LeRoy soon suffered from cold symptoms which developed into pneumonia and an elevated temperature. The oncologist ordered his admission to the hospital. When he was comfortably settled in his room, I told him that all of the children and their families were with me, having arrived for a special community event at Messiah Village. "That's wonderful," he responded. Those were his last words.

The following day we met in the hospital chapel to discuss with a doctor the option of keeping LeRoy alive with a respirator. I felt no peace about that option. I knew LeRoy would not want to prolong the dying process. We chose against it. Before leaving the chapel the Messiah Village pastor arrived to pray before he visited my husband. I asked him to pray with me, knowing that I had in effect said "goodbye" to LeRoy. Our son brought earphones which we lovingly placed over LeRoy's ears and played tapes of hymns that he loved. Two days later his breathing became irregular. We stood by as he drew his last breath.

Grief took on new hues. I felt a sense of relief that the suffering was finished for LeRoy, but I was hardly prepared for my walk through grief without him. At the burial service as the casket was lowered into the grave, I found myself wanting to join him in the grave. Later, I walked into "our" cottage with a heavy heart and a worn body. Life had lost its meaning. Nothing seemed important, not even eating. "For what," I questioned as I stood at my sink.

I was content to be the wife of L. B. Walters, the mother of four children, and grandmother of nine. Now I had to establish a new role as a single person—a widow. When my counselors told me, "You know death is final; you'll never really get over this," I was brought up straight, but I needed to hear the hard facts. With God's help, step by step, I made friends with other widows. In my devotions I was drawn to Scriptures of God's care for widows. Family, friends and neighbors were helpful and supportive. I attended grief support sessions at a local church. I knew, however, that I would not be able to depend solely upon friends and family for the healing of my heart. The pastor at the Messiah Village Church encouraged me to return to activities in which I was involved before LeRoy's physical deterioration.

I reactivated my nursing skills in the Messiah Village home care program. My first client was my college Latin teacher. It was exactly what I needed. My older sister needed my assistance, and it was comforting being with her. I responded to the need for an organist at another Brethren in Christ church and found fulfillment in serving there for three years. It has been 14 years since LeRoy's death. I keep busy as a volunteer by playing the piano for singing groups at Messiah Village, visiting and reading to residents, working for Home Care when needed, and hosting overnight guests in the cottage which LeRoy and I enjoyed together. I have truly learned to live again.

Cora, a resident of Messiah Village in Mechanicsburg, Pa., is a member of the Messiah Village Church and continues an active life among her friends and family. She is the mother of four adult children and nine grandchildren.

After Glow

by Cora E. Walters

I love you, darling,
and always will;
And even though your voice
is still,
I feel you near,
I take your hand, and know
that in that bright fair land,
you wait for me.



Crying in the Darkness

O God,
You have abandoned me;
I sit and watch as death
Creeps up the wrinkled bed,
To steal all hope;
Love murmurs of my heart,
Unheard by deafened ears,
Burn furrows in my soul
Like acid drops;

There were so many things
We planned to do today,
And dreams for days to come,
Lie in ashes.

And You—
You say you're by my side
But you're not here with me,
There is no peace or comfort,
I'm all alone;
No strong, embracing arm
Upholds me as I cry,
I scream in vain,

O God,
How could you abandon me?

by Lynda L. Kelly

When the chaplain provides sanctuary for the grieving

Grief is a very personal thing. Although there may be common patterns of experience, no two situations are exactly alike. In health care institutions, women are often the most frequent visitors. The reasons for this are varied. Among the laity, more women volunteer as spiritual and religious care visitors. In spite of changing gender roles, many people continue to believe that women are more capable of dealing with sickness and death. There are expectations that go with that role no matter who fills it. Care providers are to be strong, to "be there" for the one who is ill, to assist others in their journeys through grief and deal "well" with their own grief. Grief often raises other issues that can complicate and/or hinder the healthy process of healing.

The following are three stories of women and their experiences with grief. Issues for each were different and while all expressed faith in a loving God, they struggled with the nitty-gritty reality of dying, death and grief. (Names have been changed.)

The "strong" griever

The family spent three days sitting, listening with fear that the disembodied voice of the intercom would name the intensive care unit as the location of the "code blue" (cardiac arrest). They knew that it might be Dan because of his fragile condition. Dan's wife, Mona, stayed in the hospital 22 hours of every day, sitting with her husband for five minutes every hour. Other family members came and went as jobs and family responsibilities allowed.

Mona comforted her children, arranged lodging and meals for Dan's parents. She wept with her children and shared precious, funny memories. She discussed funeral services, burial plots and organ donation with her min-

ister and with me, the chaplain. With her minister, Mona maintained a calm and controlled demeanor. All was well. She was trusting God to give her strength. Yet with me Mona allowed small spurts of anger and pain to escape her tight emotional control. She denied her own need for sleep and refused my offers to sit with Dan through the night so she could sleep in her own bed. Although she welcomed me, she was unable to talk about her own feelings.

When her husband died, Mona comforted everyone, called family and thanked all the staff for their compassionate care. She declared that she believed Dan had gone to a better place. She would not cry, but rejoiced in the years they had together and the grace of God that didn't allow him to suffer any more. Mona seemed to have all the "right" words. But two years later she still visited the grave every day and acted depressed. She seemed alone, un comforted and afraid. I felt a deep sense of failure because I had been unable to assist Mona to drop her rigid control, to allow her feelings to surface, and then to begin the journey towards healing. For Mona, God—the Healer, Comforter and Giver of Hope—seemed to be a stranger.

The unmasked griever

An ambulance brought an unconscious Tammy to the hospital. Over the years she had been a frequent visitor at the emergency department. It was believed that this had been another in a long history of suicide attempts. Usually Tammy called 911 before she lost consciousness; this time she hadn't done so. Her four daughters came to the ICU and continued to share the vigil through the week. Within a day they asked me to help them sort out their feelings. They expressed anger, fear and guilty hope. At times they feared their mother would die and at other times, hoped that she would. A mother who played one child against another, who stole money from them when she visited, who threatened and aborted numerous suicide attempts, now lay unconscious with minimal brain activity.

Grief confronted Tammy's daughters with the necessity to face other ongoing issues that had been destructive to their relationships with each other and their mother. Many nights after work they gathered in my office. They exposed their pain and anger to each other and to God. When Tammy died a week after being admitted, her children had begun the journey towards reconciliation

O God,
The night is far too long,
Can I last another day?
There's nothing left to feel
But emptiness;
His body is a husk,
I hardly know him now,
His spirit's gone away,
To you, I think;

I remember better times
Of laughter, hope and play,
And unexpectedly
I'm comforted;

And You—
I heard a still, small voice
That whispered love to me,
Yet I'm still angry, Lord,
And mostly at you;
My mustard seed of faith
Is smaller than I thought,
I need you more than ever,

O God,
Don't abandon me now!

—Lynda Kelly

and healing. They had made great strides and were building strong bonds of love. The God of forgiveness and hope became a real participant in their lives.

Not all the girls had come to the place where they could forgive the abuse of the past. That would take time. But they supported each other in the ongoing process toward wholeness. God met them where they were, not where they wanted or hoped to be. They found God willing to accept their anger and hurt as they laid bare their souls. They experienced God—the Rock, the Counselor, the Queller-of-Storms.

The reconciled griever

Candice had been estranged from Gilbert for several years before he had a stroke complicated by additional health concerns. In Candice's cultural and religious background, divorce is forbidden. Gilbert became institutionalized because he was no longer able to care for himself. He named Candice as his next of kin on his admission form. She became involved in his care almost against her will. As Gilbert's health deteriorated, the extended family's expectation of Candice increased. The stroke had damaged Gilbert's ability to speak, and although he regained some functioning his speech remained slurred. Candice began to visit two or three times a week. The first visits often ended in shouting matches.

When all else failed, I was called to intervene and help them find a better way to communicate. They finally decided to meet with me weekly, to deal with their relationship and Gilbert's worsening prognosis. They talked about long-term hostilities, marital infidelity and Gilbert's approaching death. It was a prolonged and painful process. Yet Gilbert who said he never

cried, wept with remorse and asked for forgiveness. Candice began to express her anger and pain and spoke of how she had built walls to protect herself.

When Gilbert died following another massive stroke, Candice had already done a significant amount of grieving. Gilbert had also been able to grieve his own impending death. He said goodbye to his children and grandchildren knowing that they were closer to him at his death than they had been during his days of health. After his death, Candice said if there had not been pressure from the family she might have remained estranged from Gilbert and might never have faced the bitterness. She was thankful that hadn't occurred. She experienced the love of God that gives a second chance. God was Comforter, Hope and Forgiveness.

There is no perfect way to deal with grief. I've learned that the only way to find renewed hope and healing is to face grief and, minute by minute, struggle through it. The saying, "If it feels good, do it," characterizes much of society's philosophy of living. It also implies that when things get difficult, it is OK to bail out. Grief that isn't dealt with constructively is like a dormant volcano that will erupt sooner or later. In grief, faith may mean hanging on by our fingernails; hope sometimes grows faint and nebulous; love is often the springboard for agonizing pain. Yet, through it all God's promise to walk with us through the valley of death doesn't change. Grief has the power both to teach us more about God and to help us understand ourselves better.

Lynda serves as coordinator of spiritual and religious care for mental health and long-term care for the Province of Ontario. In 1987, she was the first woman to be officially ordained in the Brethren in Christ Church. She is married, is the mother of two daughters and enjoys three grandsons. She and her family live at Agincourt, Ont., and worship at the Bridalwood Brethren in Christ Church.



"Ultimately, his feeling of being rejected by the church transferred into his feeling of being rejected by God."

by Ila J. Brubaker

When unthinkable grief rends a mother's heart

One of the happiest moments of my life occurred on an autumn day in 1957 when our family doctor called and said, "Ila, I have a surprise for you. There are going to be two this time." I had never wished for twins, but I was so excited that a short time later I accidentally drove over some flower beds as I backed out of the garage of the parsonage in Chino, California. Our home was already blessed with two daughters, and early one Sunday morning in December, they joined us in welcoming twin boys, Darrel Jay and David Ray. Following their birth, my husband returned to church in time to announce the joy of our new arrivals and to resume his pastoral responsibilities for the worship service. On the following Sunday morning, our church family rejoiced with us and gathered outside our livingroom window to get a close-up view of the latest additions to the pastoral family. As the babies grew into toddlers, we kept the camera within easy reach to capture special moments of inquisitive exploration.

Church fellowship and activities, including Bible quizzing and drama, were central in our sons' lives and the developing relationships later led to opportunities for denominational leadership. Following graduation from Messiah College, Darrel sensed a call into Christian ministry. After completing seminary, Darrel and his wife, Sheri, moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to begin their first pastorate. During those years, Darrel discovered serious sexual improprieties in a former church setting.

Darrel was aware of the risk, but after carefully pondering the seriousness of the impropriety, realized that he must share the information with someone in leadership. After waiting patiently for a year with no sign of response, he then asked permission to provide witnesses to the exploitation

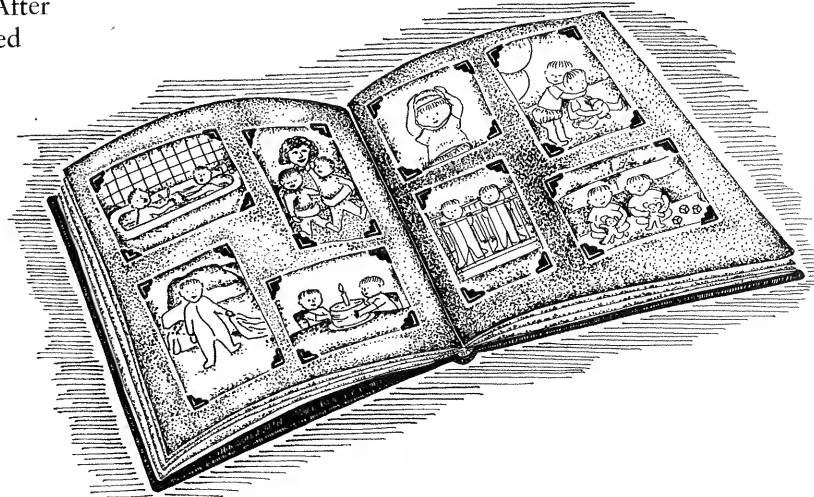
at a meeting of church leaders. Darrel's request was denied at that time. In the meantime, Darrel became aware that he could lose his ministry in the denomination if he continued his efforts.

Finally, Darrel went into a deep clinical depression. The church leaders he loved and trusted from childhood, the church where his father had served for 40 years, the church where his most cherished life-long friendships had been nurtured, gradually became a source of unspeakable disillusionment and pain.

As a mother, I felt Darrel's pain deeply. I remember him saying, "I know I did the right thing, and I knew it could cost my ministry, but I didn't know it would cost my health." There seemed to be no adequate answers to his questions. My heart cried out in anguish with him.

For two years Darrel attempted to climb out of the tunnel of depression, living with the difficult side effects of medication and the stigma that is often placed on those who suffer from depressive illnesses. Ultimately, his feeling of being rejected by the church transferred into his feeling of being rejected by God. On February 25, 1991, as his last ray of hope disappeared, Darrel took his own life while serving as campus pastor at Eastern Mennonite University.

Eight years have now passed since Darrel's death, and although some questions remain, I share reflections that are the fruit of my journey of grief.



“Remember sin and victimization do not have the last word. . . . Our Lord of life has the last word.” Darrel wrote these words of wisdom, even though he himself was hospitalized at the time.”

“The journey had been too long and devastating to add one more day of pain. Like other organs of the body, the brain can also become ill from stress.”

Grieving is an on-going process

We as a family continue to be aware of our deep loss. Darrel was an encourager who listened with his heart. He also possessed a delightful sense of humor and showered gifts of grace on all of us. Each family gathering, each family picture, is now a poignant reminder that someone very precious is missing from our family circle.

And there are many other reminders. Just recently as we were singing a beautiful worship chorus in our morning service, I recognized it as one that Darrel and Sheri had included in their wedding music in 1982. My tears flowed freely, and I could no longer sing. Even more painful is the anniversary of Darrel's death. Each year my husband and I continue to need extra rest and supernatural strength to survive the painful memory of Darrel's suffering.

I also grieve the loss of Darrel's ministry to others beyond our family. God had blessed Darrel with unusual gifts for ministry—a combination of understanding love, undaunted courage and exceptional wisdom. One of his teachers at Messiah College told us that Darrel possessed the gift of a prophet. His insights were truly amazing, a gift that only comes from God. When a close friend who had been raped was receiving treatment at Philhaven, a local mental health treatment facility, Darrel sent the following note, “Remember sin and victimization do not have the last word. . . . Our Lord of life has the last word.” Darrel wrote these words of wisdom, even though he himself was hospitalized at Philhaven at the time.

Depressive illnesses are devastating and often misunderstood

Our family does not blame Darrel, for we walked the painful journey with him and know how sincerely he tried to do what was right. We observed him facing incredible roadblocks which seemed impossible to overcome. There would have been other options, but he had become too ill to think clearly. The journey had been too long and devastating to add one more day of pain. Like other organs of the body, the brain can also become ill from stress. Darrel, who was carrying a heavy overload of stress, could no longer function with normal strength and resilience.

God is faithful

Because of our experience, I now have a greater awareness of God's faithfulness. Following Darrel's death, the words of Isaiah 53:4, “Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows” came to me so clearly. My grief was overwhelming, and I found relief in giving the grief I could not bear to the One who could carry my sorrow. The comforting words from Psalm 62:1, “My soul finds rest in God alone,” also brought peace to our hearts during sleepless nights.

We have experienced God's love through faithful friends in their prayers, hugs, tears, cards and flowers and in their giving to Darrel's scholarship fund at Eastern Mennonite University. Many others care enough to ask how we're doing and permit us to talk about Darrel. As a family we will never forget Darrel. It is comforting to know that others remember him also.

We have a glorious hope

Heaven has become more real to me since Darrel's death. No matter what evil may befall us or those we love, I know that *nothing* can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:38,39). This was Darrel's favorite verse, and it continues to provide comfort for our family. As Darrel said, “Our Lord of Life has the last word,” and because of the Resurrection, we know that God also has the last word over death. We anticipate a joyful reunion where there will be no more separation. Until then, God's loving comfort sustains us.

Ila resides in Dillsburg, Pa., with her husband of 48 years. She is the mother of four children and grandmother of six. She is a graduate of Messiah Junior College, Upland College and Evangelical School of Theology. From 1990–1998 she enjoyed part-time employment at Messiah Village, serving as a chaplain on the pastoral care staff in 1998. Since retirement she continues to volunteer at Messiah Village.

"The angry-at-mom part of me says, 'I'll show her! I don't need her!' It's true; I can do this without her. But I wish I didn't have to."

by Kim W. Dalton

When the one who birthed you extinguishes her own life

July 2, 1992: My mother committed suicide today. I never dreamed she would actually do it! In retrospect, I consider her family history and her own previous suicide plan some 20 years ago (thwarted because someone stole her handgun). Her brother shot and killed himself about 30 years ago. Experts say that if panic attacks accompany depression then suicide risk is higher. But I never thought she'd do it.

Thus began nearly seven years of journal entries which I reviewed to write this article. Frederick Buechner's memoir, *The Sacred Journey*, describes events of his early years. Those events included his father's suicide, and later, the suicide of his father's brother. Of the many books I have read in the wake of my own mother's suicide this book best guided me in surviving suicide. Buechner's purpose, and mine, in writing is to reflect upon and attempt to understand history as a sacred journey.

Deep within history, as it gets itself written down in history books and newspapers, in the letters we write and in the diaries we keep, is sacred history, is God's purpose working itself out in the apparent purposelessness of human history and of our separate histories, is the history, in short, of the saving and losing of souls, including our own. . . . We must learn to listen to our lives for the holy and elusive word that is spoken in us out of their depths (Buechner, pp. 4-5).

Nine years ago an unexpected heart attack took my father's life at age 61. In response, my mother too began her descent toward death. As I look back now, I believe I lost both parents that year. Dad died "well" as the saying goes. His heart allowed a consciousness long enough to say good "goodbyes." "Rachel, I love you. Tell the children that I love them!" Mom died wickedly, terribly, with a borrowed Smith and Wesson 357 magnum. Her finger pulled the trigger to release a hollow-point bullet into her

heart. A search and rescue team of neighbors and professionals stood five to 10 feet away calling to her in the darkness. She chose death; she attacked her own heart.

July 29, 1992: We family members now all have a portion of Mom's cremains.

Cremains

No good "Good-byes"

The question "Why?"

Remains.

Your journey ends

A bullet rends

Maternal sin

Remains.

So now the task

Memories grasp

Scatter your last

Remains.

September 2-8, 1992: I am in Alabama. I have come to the house of my dead parents to grieve, to sort through feelings and possessions, and to be with my siblings. I awoke to a cool rain. It rained the night Mom shot herself. It washed away the blood stains. None for me to see and know it was real. Two urges, work and eat compulsively, are predominate so far. Three evening meals here so far, and I'm the mom who makes the home-cooked meals. A storm of sadness swept in suddenly. No more Mom to comfort and nurture us with food.

September 19, 1992: Mom's birthday.

Birthday wishes

You would have been sixty today.

You should have been sixty today.

I'd already gotten a present for you

There's nobody else to give the thing to

So I sit here and wonder just what I'm to do

No more "Happy Birthday to You."

You would have been sixty today.

You could have been sixty today.

"On some crazy level I believe that if I was important enough, Mom would have stayed alive and said, 'I don't want to leave Kim.'"

*But courage, genetics or something went wrong
These things I will ponder all my life long
Lord, come hold me now in Your arms tender, strong
An orphan, to you I belong.
You would have been sixty.
You should have been sixty.
You could have been sixty
today.*

October 16, 1992: *I am pregnant. Child number three will arrive (if all goes well) around June 18, 1993. Mom obviously won't be here to give me herb pills and advice. Nor will she be present to support me out of her 30-plus years as a labor and delivery nurse. I know that will be hard. The angry-at-mom part of me says, "I'll show her! I don't need her!" It's true; I can do this without her. But I wish I didn't have to.*

July 2, 1993: *Today is the one-year anniversary of Mom's suicide. It's been an emotional day. I've cried a lot. Ever since Jesse's birth, I've thought more and more about Mom and the events of last year. Mostly I've been sad. I've felt some anger but mostly, just sad. A feeling of loss and abandonment. Inside of me is a wound that says I'm not lovable and nobody wants to be with me. On some crazy level I believe that if I was important enough, Mom would have stayed alive and said, "I don't want to leave Kim." I've thought, too, about others who have abandoned me in ways large and small. I view it as a wound but also as a bitterness, a lack of forgiveness on my part. There's this ambivalence, I want to forgive, let go, but I also want to hold on to the hurt and anger.*

None of my sibs have called today or in the past week. I thought of calling but decided to wait. Part of me wants to withdraw, part wants to talk. I am so exhausted.

In the wake of these horrible losses, I began my own descent into grief and depression and duel with death. I believe that the primary wound to me of Mom's suicide was to think that someday I, too, would die by my own hand. The thinking goes, "If she did it, so will I. I am my mother's daughter." Again, Buechner captured my fears.

What might have sucked me under was not the grief but the fear of it—the fear that there might really be some fatal family flaw that I had inherited like the cut of my jaw or that, by some grim process of autosuggestion if nothing else, I would end up as those two brothers had (Buechner, p. 84).

October 14, 1993: *I have come to accept about myself that I am a chronically depressed person. I am like my mother in this. God deliver me from her end! I tell myself, 'Be happy. Hope.' But more days than not I do not (cannot?) follow my own advice. Self-depreciating thoughts torment me. Those who know my internal struggles say I am courageous, admirable, lovable. I usually discount their evaluation. And I am angry. Depression and anger and the realities of children's demands fuel what seems to be my eternal flame of rage. Christ have mercy! These days when depression and rage dance inside me I transiently consider my own death as a pleasant fantasy. Lord keep me from this evil. Hold me. Bind my wounds. Restore my soul.*

September 4, 1994: *I began taking an antidepressant July 13. Almost immediately my chronic depression was positively affected. The most amazing part to me is the formerly foreign feeling of joy that visits me! The joy, a surprise visitor is so, so welcome! Another change, my chronic level of anger has also greatly diminished.*

December 8, 1994: *I feel a sadness inside me that has been flowing downstream to its barrier dam. The waters are high on this dam. I need to wisely release the pressure.*

February 24, 1995: *I keep trying to understand anger. How to do it and yet still be on Your path, Lord, on track. Last night Christopher got weepy and asked, "How did Grandmama Rachel die?" He wouldn't settle for, "She got hurt in her chest and heart" this time. So I told him she was very sick and was holding a gun and it went off. He was satisfied with that and responded, "So she killed herself."*

"Yes," I replied, "but it was a mistake. She shouldn't have had a gun. It was a bad thing."

Then he said, "I miss her."

"I miss her too, son."

continued on page 16

"My mother chose death too many times in large and small events: self-hate, neglect of medical help, hopelessness, rejection of help from friends and family, on and on until the slope became so slippery at the end, in a way, she had no choice."

July 2, 1995: Tonight marks the third-year anniversary of Mom's suicide. I have felt more sadness this year, a different grief though. This year I have wanted to look at pictures of Mom and Dad! Up until now I have avoided pictures, even taking all Mom's pictures off our walls after her suicide. The other night I sat for two hours and pored over all my photo albums, a review of lives and deaths. Some pictures jumped out at me, and I cried and cried. Some in particular of Mom's face I touched, wanting to feel her face, warmth, skin.

February 29, 1996: I have this cancer of anger that's killing me. I am dying. The anger is about hating Mom. Under all the grief is a profound anger. "In wrath, may you remember mercy" (Habakkuk 3:2).

March 18, 1996: I am not depressed, but I still feel sad when thoughts stir up Mom. I took out and dusted off a picture of Mom and Dad. I plan to hang it on our family's photo wall tomorrow. Another step in healing.

July 6, 1996: The fourth anniversary of Mom's suicide passed while on this visit to Virginia. Christopher and I took a walk in the park. In the almost-solitude I thought about life and death. I wondered again about how she must have been feeling. I thought of all she has missed in my life and my children's lives. Jesse's birth, Christopher's difficulties, Zachary's first year of school, all the play and art, all my forward progress in finding my voice and allowing God to love me. I feel heavy-hearted as I write now. I do miss you, Mom and Dad! I wish my children could have known you! Thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness! Thank you that you never leave me!

February 3, 1997: My in-laws' 50th wedding anniversary! My reaction is mixed, so happy for them, so angry that my parents won't be around for their own should-have-been 50th anniversary. Celebrations of life highlight my losses to death.

July 1, 1997: Today on the eve of the fifth-year anniversary of Mom's suicide, I saw my psychiatrist to begin a trial of yet another medication. The paradox of hope and despair juxtaposed in my mind and heart feels overwhelming. Despair says I will end up like Mom as I age. Hope says, "Not so!" I am not my Mom, and I am choosing actions she refused (like taking medications)!



July 2, 1997: I saw the therapist. He voiced his belief that this is not mental illness but appropriate grief. He shared that years five through ten (after losing his own father and brother) were the most difficult. "That's when you know that they are really gone; they have missed so much of your life. It's a greater finality." This suffering stinks but there is comfort in the Lord and in the people who support me. My heart is grateful.

August 1, 1997: In a therapy session I confessed my fears and increased anxiety about suicidal thoughts. A spontaneous thought as I walked into my house on this beautiful summer day: "This would be a good day to die!" Rachel killed herself after a beautiful summer day. I am not Rachel!

July 8, 1998: This sixth anniversary of mom's suicide, compared to last year, has been a walk in a lovely park. This time last year I was so very depressed and grieving and overwhelmed. It feels wonderful to not be in that much pain. However, there has been an ache, a quiet grief in my chest these past five days. I truly understand in a deeper way that verse, "We do not grieve as those without hope" (1 Thess. 4:13). There is a bottom to my sadness; God holds me. I am claiming new names and a purpose out of this darkness. Last Monday, before the anniversary date, I ended my individual therapy again. The reason for the timing was a desire to choose my own 'goodbye' timing. Instead of being the victim of Mom's 'goodbye,' I realized that I was ready to say my own goodbye in my own timing."

"The other night I sat for two hours and pored over all my photo albums, a review of lives and deaths. Some pictures jumped out at me, and I cried and cried. Some in particular of Mom's face I touched, wanting to feel her face, warmth, skin."

Three other great items of inheritance to me, and all survivors of suicide, were guilt, unanswered questions and rage. Guilt: I am a licensed psychologist, a professional who could not even save her own mother. And I *tried*. Believe me, I tried! Questions: "Why?" is the question, among many, that haunts me still. Rage: The rage did subside as I chose to let go of my bitterness. But, the anger does not entirely go away. Her action became a bomb site whose epicenter is only now allowing pioneer wildflowers to grow. Her bomb hit me, my marriage, my husband and children, my siblings, her siblings, other relatives and friends, even acquaintances and strangers. The monarch in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" spoke it well, "All are punished!" My rage says to my mother, "We do not deserve this suffering! How dare you do this to us?"

In these years since 1992, with the help of two therapists, spiritual mentors, a loving husband and family, friends, and God, I have chosen to live. I realize that the choice is mine. Neither fate nor circumstances control this choice. I am responsible to *choose* life, actively, daily, sometimes even moment by moment. I am convinced that all choices boil down to two options, life or death. My mother chose death too many times in large and small events: self-hate, neglect of medical help, hopelessness, rejection of help from friends and family, on and on until the slope became so slippery at the end, in a way, she had no choice. I believe that at the moment of her suicide, and the moments leading up to it, she was clinically psychotic. She could not see the reality of what others knew, that there is no pain so deep nor heart so torn that Christ Jesus cannot reach nor mend.

Kim is a licensed psychologist with a practice in Harrisburg, Pa. She is married and the mother of three sons. She and her family worship at the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church where her husband is senior pastor.


by Sharon Brunner

When grief is kindled by homelessness

Women in the throes of grief have permeated my network of relationships during the last 10 years. The most obvious cause of these women's grief is their newly designated station in life—homelessness. But beneath the surface looms additional rationale for grief. The loss of a place to call home represents formidable losses of safety, security, care and love. Frequently the loss of a relationship preceded the loss of home, making the cumulative sorrow indescribable and nearly impossible to overcome.

While death can bring about despair and depression because of the irreversible nature of the loss, a broken relationship can leave the person with a lingering hope for reconciliation as well as ambivalence, confusion and vulnerability. Not infrequently, the former relationship was unhealthy and abusive. The grief of the homeless woman is compounded by loss of love, home, the feeling of belonging and a sense of well-being. Children of the homeless woman now have their security in jeopardy. Mothers sorrow over the suffering of their children. Intense worry overshadows any certainty about the future care of their offspring.

In the midst of the immediate crises of homelessness, a woman will struggle with feelings of inadequacy and frequently will succumb to her self-perception of being a failure. When she suffers violence and control at the hands of one she trusted, that betrayal of trust has far-reaching ramifications. Because of the betrayal, she loses trust in others, including God. The hardest trust to be restored can be trust in herself, and in her perceptions, feelings and decision-making ability.

Another level of grief stems from the homeless woman's loss of dreams, especially the dream of having a good and happy life. The average age of newly homeless women who have found shelter in the Lifeline programs is 30. Most of these women came from a Christian home and an established support community of family and friends,

"Another level of grief stems from the homeless woman's loss of dreams, especially the dream of having a good and happy life."

with an accompanying sense of safety and security, though tenuous at times. Some of the women have lived lives of prayer, with a considerable participation in the life of the church. When they find themselves suddenly in the tumultuous and vulnerable state of homelessness, women often tell me that they have lost everything. Nothing that qualified as normalcy in life is intact.

The challenges they face in their journey of grief are staggering. They must confront faulty thinking patterns which foster the idea that because of mistakes they made, they somehow deserve their awful calamity. I have witnessed spiritual pain generated by feelings of abandonment by God, and by blame and abandonment by their church family.

Women face the loss of extended family support because frequently it is not safe to maintain communication with family and friends. A woman's grief of being separated from one or more of her children, and of facing the huge outlay of energy for custody hearings, weighs heavily upon her fragile emotional system. One woman at Lifeline cried herself to sleep every night for two years until she was reunited with her 6-year-old.

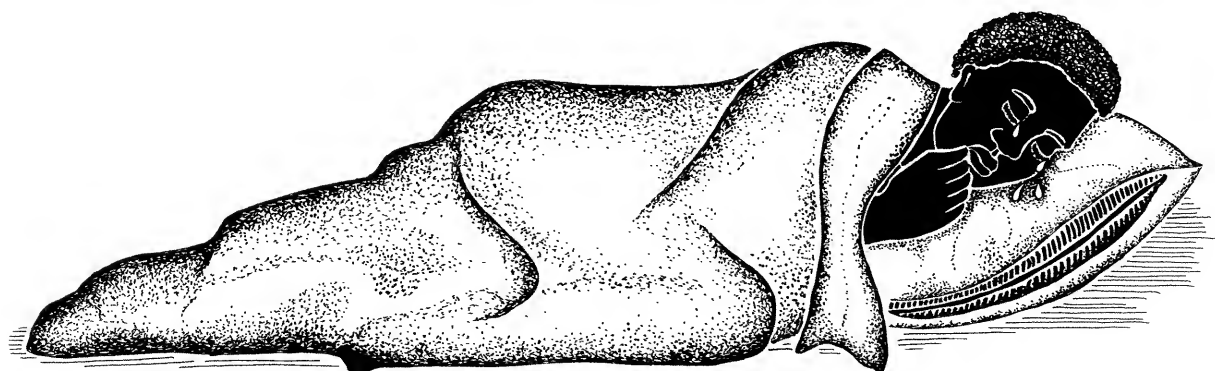
The tremendous suffering and grief of these homeless women also means a tremendous potential for healing and restoration; the deeper the sorrow, the greater the joy of overcoming. To recover from her losses requires many steps. The restoration of love and caring in a person's life makes all the difference. Healing comes one day at a time, not without its own set of difficulties and pain. Women who are getting back on their feet need to acknowledge

pain that they may have helped to create, as well as the pain which came from situations which were out of their control. They must allow themselves to experience the anger over their painful and often harmful experiences. They are assisted in moving toward a willingness to let go and to forgive themselves and others for what they have suffered.

It is also important in the move toward healing and independence for her to feel encouraged about herself and her ability to make good decisions for her own life and the lives of her children. Her greatest hope for healing is in her ability to grasp that she is a one-of-a-kind individual, who is gifted with special talents that can lead her to a happy and fulfilled life. This walk to confidence in God, self and others is most often a long and arduous journey.

Because I have witnessed heartache and hardship in the lives of homeless women and children I am awestruck by the contrasting miracle of healing, growth and thriving in these same people. I am continually honored to know these women and to experience their strength, courage and faith.

Since 1989, Sheron has been the director of Lifeline Ministries, a shelter, rehabilitation and training center for homeless women and children in San Francisco, Calif.



Women in Ministry

Carol Rose was ordained May 23 as pastor of Mennonite Church of the Servant, Wichita, Kan.

Chris Birky was ordained as pastor at Hopewell Mennonite Church, Kouts, Ind.

Mary Grove was licensed as chaplain at Greencroft retirement community, Goshen, Ind.

Nina Lanctot is pastor of Belmont Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Ind.

Susan E. Janzen has begun a pastorate at New Hope Mennonite Church, Omaha, Neb.

compiled by Janet M. Peifer

Recommended resources on loss and grief

Childs-Gowell, Elaine. *Good Grief Rituals: Tools for Healing/A Healing Companion*. Station Hill, 1992.

Clayton, Jean. *Women in Mourning*. Omaha, Neb.: Centering Corporation, 1996.

Davis, Deborah. *Empty Cradle, Broken Heart: Surviving the Death of Your Baby*. Fulcrum, 1996.

Davidson, Glen W. *Understanding Mourning*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1984.

Dotterweich, Kass P. *Grieving as a Woman: Moving Through Life's Many Losses*. St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey, 1998.

Dunn, Hank. *Light in the Shadows: Meditations While Living With a Life-Threatening Illness*. Leesburg, VA: A & A, 1999.

Fine, Carla. *No Time to Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*. Doubleday, 1997.

Finkbeiner, Ann K. *After the Death of a Child: Living With Loss Through the Years*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1996.

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WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Gwen Groff. Layout by Beth Oberholtzer Design.

Subscription cost is \$12 U.S./\$15 Cdn. for one year or \$20 U.S./\$25 Cdn. for two years. Send all subscriptions, correspondence and address changes to Editor, MCC Women's Concerns, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; telephone 717-859-3889; fax 717-859-3875. Canadian subscribers may pay in Canadian currency.

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